



SHARP FACTS

Unplanned Pregnancy Prevention: Emergency Contraceptive Pills

September 23, 2010



Why is Family Planning Important?

In the United States, only half of pregnancies are planned at the time of conception. For some of these unplanned pregnancies, the women would prefer to get pregnant later; others do not desire pregnancy at all. About one half of unplanned pregnancies end in an induced abortion. Among active duty enlisted female Sailors surveyed in 2005, nearly 2 out of 3 (64%) said their last pregnancy while in the Navy was unplanned. Half of these women were not using any form of birth control. Unplanned pregnancies in the U.S. are associated with more problems for the mother and infant than planned pregnancies. Women with unplanned pregnancies cannot take advantage of preconception care, a special healthcare visit that helps the women achieve the healthiest possible pregnancy outcome. Planning to become pregnant at a time when a woman is healthy and ready to become a parent can maximize the health and opportunities for women, children and families.

What is the most effective method of birth control?

Only abstinence (not having sex) is 100% effective in preventing pregnancy. Birth control methods that are highly effective are hormone injections (Depo-Prevara), IUDs (intrauterine devices) and sterilization (vasectomy and tubal ligation). Methods that can be very effective when used correctly are birth control pills, the "ring", the "patch", periodic abstinence (natural family planning), the diaphragm, and condoms.

What can a woman do to prevent pregnancy if she has unprotected sex?

If a woman has had sex without using birth control or if something happened (such as a condom broke), she can use emergency contraception to reduce her risk of becoming pregnant. PLAN B One-Step®, (Levonorgestrel) is an emergency contraceptive pill which has been approved by the FDA for over-the-counter sales. PLAN B One-Step is available at Navy pharmacies upon request to anyone aged 18 and over who is authorized care in a military medical facility. Plan B One-Step may also be purchased over the counter at many retail pharmacies in all 50 states by anyone aged 18 and over. In some states, PLAN B One-Step is also available over the counter at retail pharmacies to females of all ages, including those under 17.

Another emergency contraceptive pill approved by the FDA is Ella® (ulipristal acetate). This prescription-only product prevents pregnancy when taken orally within 120 hours (five days) after a contraceptive failure or unprotected sex.

Facts about emergency contraceptive pills

The mechanism of action of emergency contraceptive pills is not fully understood. They may work by disrupting ovulation, fertilization, or implantation. These pills are not effective once the fertilized egg has implanted in the uterus and will not harm an established pregnancy.

Emergency contraceptive pills:

- do **not** protect against sexually transmitted diseases.
- are **not** intended for frequent use.
- should **not** be taken *before* unprotected sex.
- are **not** recommended as the primary form of contraception, because ECPs are not as effective as many other forms of contraception.

SHARP FACTS

Unplanned Pregnancy Prevention: Emergency Contraceptive Pills

How effective are emergency contraceptive pills?

Emergency contraceptive pills containing progestin only, such as PLAN B One-Step®, reduce the risk of pregnancy by up to 89% - which means the number of women who would be expected to become pregnant after unprotected sex drops from 8 of 100 without any contraception to about 1 of 100 when PLAN B® is taken within 72 hours of the unprotected sex. Use of ECPs containing combined estrogen-progestin reduce the risk of pregnancy by 75%. Timing is important - this type of ECPs are more effective when taken sooner.

Ella® remains equally effective through day 5 after the sexual encounter.

What will happen when I take emergency contraceptive pills? Side effects may include nausea and vomiting, and may cause spotting or changes in the amount, timing or duration of the next menstrual period.

Are emergency contraceptive pills the same as the "morning after pill"? Yes. However, the words "morning after" are misleading, because emergency contraceptive pills can be used up to 72 hours after sex (or 120 hours after sex with Ella), not just the next morning.

Are emergency contraceptive pills the same as "abortion medications"? No. Abortion medications are used to terminate an established pregnancy and must be prescribed by a doctor.

What family planning services are available through the Navy?

Contraception

A wide variety of contraceptives are available at no cost to DoD health care beneficiaries from Navy Medicine professionals.

Counseling and information

BUMED Instruction 6300.9 directs Naval medical facilities, including facilities on board naval vessels, to provide (or authorizes them to provide referral to) family planning services. Also, MANMED Article 15-112 provides annual health maintenance examination requirements for all active duty women and includes family planning, contraceptive counseling, and STD prevention counseling. Counseling should include information on availability and effectiveness of birth control methods (including emergency contraception).

Emergency Contraceptives

PLAN B One-Step is available at no cost over the counter in Navy pharmacies by DoD health care beneficiaries aged 18 and over.

Where can I get more information?

For detailed information, counseling, and access to birth control options, contact your health care provider. For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program at http://www.nmcphc.med.navy.mil/Healthy_Living/

This information was adapted by the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP), Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center from Hatcher et al (2009) Contraceptive Technology, 19th ed; Protecting Against Unintended Pregnancy: A Guide to Contraceptive Choices, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (June 2000 and Aug 2010); BUMEDINST 6300.9 Family Planning Services (20 Sep 2001); MANMED Article 15-112, Annual Health Maintenance Examination Recommendations for Active Duty Members; BUMED Policy 07-005, Prescribing, Dispensing and Distribution of Plan B (Levonorgestrel), 27 Feb 2007; Emergency Contraception, Kaiser Family Foundation fact sheet Aug 2010; Uriell, Z. (2006) Results of the 2005 Pregnancy and Parenthood Survey. Navy Personnel Research, Studies, & Technology, Millington TN; Fact Sheet - Women's Health Policy facts - Emergency Contraception, The Federal Register Feb 25, 1997 62;37:8610-8612, Certain Combined Oral Contraceptives for use as postcoital emergency contraception - notice.